

## A FEW REASONS FOR A NON-DISMISSIVE ART

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Those who keep silent are almost always lacking in subtlety and refinement of heart.<sup>1</sup>

In 1983 Peter Sloterdijk publishes *Critique of Cynical Reason* in Germany. There he argues that criticism, in every sense of the word, is living particularly dull times. A time of criticism in disguise and critical attitudes yielding to professional duties. A criticism of limited liability, rash Illuminism as success factor - an attitude at the crossing of new conformisms and old ambitions.

Thirty years later, how should we revisit the issues of the pertinence and function of criticism? How can we overcome the offensive of complicity between criticism and social order? How not to be tempted by Wagner's seduction, Walter Benjamin asked, attacking Baudelaire on his claim that 19th century dissident and non-conformist artists found refuge in "art for art's sake" in their rebellion against the market. Can we reframe the notion of "art for art's sake" through political art? Do artists, critics, curators and the market, by rendering political art necessary, mask the *enlightened false consciousness*, as Sloterdijk meant it? How can, nowadays, art defy criticism, and criticism defy art? Which social practices are connected with either and which are the conditions of possibility for criticism and for a non-dismissive art?

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich NIETZSCHE- *Ecce Homo*. New York: Dover Publications, 2004, p. 19.

After the international homogenization of the modern, there is growing appraisal of its reverse or, to put it simply: after all, the heterogeneous and plural character of the modern was always there. Just like the modern tried to dispose of the classic, from which, after all, it seemingly never strayed completely, the contemporary also aimed to part from the modern, and now proposes to revisit and reflect upon it, or so they say. That's how the economy of modernism's redemption keeps gaining new followers. These efforts waver between the search of the *Cunning of Reason* and of the *Subject of History*.

Hegel's *End of History* seems to have become the battlefield of our day. Between the unpredictable logics of nostalgia, which irons out all differences, and the mainstream of capitalism, the modern becomes an AMONG-MANY. Once a taste of the educated class, modernity wavers between the return to an ontological and idyllic vocation of art or the pragmatic conception of capital, teaching us that time can be understood as a lifestyle.

The return to a certain modernist purism as symptom of an ethos that sees itself as clean and aseptic, gets closer to a certain ideology of order that the art world needs in infected and stranded times. However, without exclusions, the *Zeitgeist à la carte* satisfies every taste: purist, multiculturalist ones, of minorities, gender, periphery, emerging countries... with centuries of History. We know how symbolic imperialism can assume disguised faces and even familiar resemblances. The words of Noam Chomsky come to mind:

In secret postwar planning, each part of the world was assigned its specific role. Thus the "major function" of Southeast Asia was to provide raw materials for the industrial powers. Africa was to be "exploited" by Europe for its own recovery. And so on, through the world.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, precarity, widespread in work, social space, art and thought, has established itself as legitimating category for the neoliberal hegemony.

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<sup>2</sup> Noam CHOMSKY. *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 1998, p. 22.

The precarity, as a dominant programme in numerous artistic projects, expresses the complex relations and contradictions between artistic production and capitalism. A certain aestheticization of precarity that we can at times observe in the art field echoes the austerity plans of capitalism which, in turn, replicate that universal diffuse that secularly accompanies the western teleological programme: in this case, the belief that, after the crisis, a better world shall arise. The problem enunciated by Theodor Adorno is still there and perhaps it may have been reinforced, namely: what is the possibility of a critical and autonomous artistic practice in the face of the social conditions of production in which the practice itself is produced?

In globalized capitalism, local modes of production submit to dominant modes of production, likewise, in the field of art, peripheral countries export artworks and artists to the international market, showing why relations between center and periphery are fundamental in the genesis of capitalism. The once called peripheral art has become the art of the so-called emerging countries...

The analogy we find between peripheral capitalism, drawn after the model of the major capitalist centers, and the art field, is highly significant. We live between expanded conceptions, be it of art or the market. In fact, critics and curators increasingly find and acknowledge artists and artworks in the - also - emerging markets of the respective emerging countries. Dislocation, decentralization and beyond-borders are the watchwords. Biennales and Art Festivals flourish. Manifestos on peripheral cultures are developed. The internationalization of art blends with global capitalism projecting the international dynamics of criticism itself. The critic's association to economic sectors and his role as mediator of the market, with an effective power to intervene, positions and places his discourse, influencing its reception. The epistemology of critical discourse, its role in the determination of the artwork's artistic value and in the artworld's functioning, is increasingly articulated with the

specific and ultra-coded semantics of money. Between tactical or strategic conventions and cooperation networks, criticism yields to the *social cornucopia*.<sup>3</sup> A dead-end for art and criticism, a web woven between art and power, subject to the Market's demands, in which the critic has been losing the monopoly of power to the collector, gallerist or curator.

We do not foresee an art without a market; artists have been and will continue to be appraised by gallerists, critics, editors, curators... even though, in some cases, they refused the system. Critics have always held a major role in the legitimation of artistic programs as well as the pronouncement of identities, movements, artworks, artists and collectives. And so the History of Critique is made of encounters and exchange relations which grow into relations of risk and struggle, disobedience and resistance.

Benjamin, in his analysis on Baudelaire, already asserted that the poet was fully aware of the situation of the intellectual of his time: "In the *flâneur*, the intelligentsia sets foot in the marketplace - ostensibly to look around, but in truth to find a buyer."<sup>4</sup>

The inflation of exhibitions that marks the current map of contemporary art should trigger a criticism that is able to resist the globalizing acculturation as well as the staff or the ascetics of art. A criticism that is able to open space for action and to set its territory in public space. How can we resist the *false enlightened conscience* that hides its perversity under the travestied of immanent critique? Blending influence with independence, the Criticism that endorses a certain promotional art, operates by way of cynicism as a form of symbolic violence.

Regardless of the extension of Criticism's concept - that would be another discussion altogether - the conceptual plurality underlying it and its

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<sup>3</sup> Karl MARX. "O Capital, livro I" in *Sobre Literatura e Arte*. Lisboa: Editorial Estampa, 1974, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Walter BENJAMIN - *Selected Writings: 1935-1938, volume 3*. Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 40.

articulation with other epistemological fields, does not exist aside from individual convictions. Criticism, like art, is always engaged and partial. The critic is not a judge, nor criticism a law, for criticism does not consist of dictating verdicts.<sup>5</sup> As Michel Foucault wrote:

The sententious critic puts me to sleep. I would prefer a critic of imaginative scintillations. He would not be sovereign, nor dressed in red. He would bear the lightning flashes of possible storms.<sup>6</sup>

The work of Criticism must question the conditions of its own exercise, dead-ends and limits, After all, such is the very condition of thought. Criticism, as a form of thought, is a form of action, a form of transformation.

An address to our time, in the face of a market that administers resistance, to criticize is to revolutionize, to bring into existence. As not everything is equivalent, criticism is audacity and radical demand of thought.

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<sup>5</sup> "He who cannot take sides must keep silent. (...) «Objectivity» must always be sacrificed to partisanship, if the cause fought for merits it." (Walter BENJAMIN - "The Critic's Technique in Thirteen theses", in *Selected Writings: 1913-1926, volume 1*. Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 460).

<sup>6</sup> Michel FOUCAULT - "Entretiens avec C. Delacampagne, février 1980", *Le Monde*, n° 10.945, 6 avril 1980, p. 3.